

New Worlds of Adoption: Navigating the Teen Years

Poster Session Submission

Primary Author:

Katie M. Hrapczynski, LGMFT
University of Maryland, College Park
255 Valley Drive, Room 1142
School of Public Health Building
University of Maryland
Department of Family Science
College Park, MD 20742
610-348-9208
katieh@umd.edu

Coauthor:

Leigh Leslie, Ph.D., LCMFT
University of Maryland, College Park
255 Valley Drive, Room 1142
School of Public Health Building
University of Maryland
Department of Family Science
College Park, MD 20742
301-405-4011
lleslie@umd.edu

Title of the poster presentation:

Transracially Adopted Adolescent Development: The Influence of Different Adolescent-Parent Perspectives of the Family

Abstract:

Transracially adopted adolescents face unique challenges as they navigate the developmental task of balancing autonomy from and connection to their family. Although it is typical for adolescents to feel misunderstood by their parents when establishing a self separate from the family, the experience of feeling misunderstood may be heightened for transracial adoptees. They may feel that their racial majority parents never fully understand them because they are of a different race¹, thereby lacking a shared experience of being a racial minority in the United States or a shared cultural background. Part of transracially adopted adolescents' emerging sense of self involves a recognition and navigation of two or more cultural backgrounds. Adoptees' lack of physical resemblance to their adoptive parents may facilitate exploration of their birth culture or search for birth parents which are entities distinct from their adoptive family². Successful navigation of developmental tasks may be particularly challenging for transracially adopted adolescents due to these unique qualities.

¹ Steinberg & Hall, 2000

² Steinberg & Hall, 2000

One aspect of the family environment researchers have focused on when seeking to understand adolescent development is the extent to which adolescents' views of their family differ from their parents'. Theory and existing literature suggest an optimal amount of discrepancy in perceptions to facilitate healthy adolescent development³. Specifically, too much or too little discrepancy in perceptions may hinder adolescents from successfully accomplishing developmental tasks, while a moderate amount of discrepancy in perceptions enables a balance of autonomy and connection to the family.

Transracial adoption provides a unique familial context for exploring discrepancy in perceptions of the family because not only do the age and familial role of the child and parent differ, but so does the biology and race of family members. Although there are no known studies that have explored perceptual discrepancies between white parents and their transracially adopted children, retrospective accounts of transracially adopted young adults expose a disconnect between the actions of their racial majority parents and their actual needs as racial minority children⁴. These accounts of discrepancy suggest that white parents and their transracially adopted child may view their family environment very differently.

After reviewing the current literature, the presentation will describe findings from a national study on transracial adoption. The presentation will describe the perceptions transracially adopted adolescents and their parents maintain regarding the cohesion and conflict in their family, in addition to examining the extent to which their perceptions differ. The influence of discrepancy in adolescent-parent perceptions of the family on transracially adoptive adolescents' developmental outcomes, such as self-esteem, internalizing behaviors, and externalizing behaviors will be explored. The presentation will consider family influences unique to the context of transracial adoption that have been associated with adolescent outcomes and may influence the relationship between discrepancy in views of the family and adolescent outcomes, such as parental cultural competence. Practical, empirical and theoretical implications relevant to promoting transracially adopted adolescent development will be elaborated upon.

³ Olson et al., 1983; Ohannessian et al., 1995, 2005

⁴ Samuels, 2009

References

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